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Why I Am a Mennonite

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Why I Am a Mennonite

By S. M. GRUBB

(Read at the Eastern District Conference, 1913)

I am a Mennonite because I am a Christian. For me to say that I am a Mennonite because I am a Christian does not imply that those in the fellowship of other communions are not Christians. One of the signs marking true Christian life is the fellowship in which the Christian stands. Differences in race, nationality, temperament, condition in life, geographical situation and historical development, things over which the individual has little or no control, are responsible for the groups into which Christians find themselves divided, but nothing in Scripture, so far as I can discover, ever warrants a Christian's flocking by himself. There were tribes in Israel, each, with their own particular traditions and sometimes their peculiar dialects. The disciples of John were noticeably unlike the disciples of Jesus. The church in Antioch differed in some particulars from the mother church in Jerusalem. Rome and Galatia, Corinth and Thessalonica had their distinguishing peculiarities. Each of these bodies, and the same may be said of the other apostolic churches not mentioned, though made up of Christians, were colored by local considerations. While it is true that the separate apostolic churches are not to be regarded as portraying differences similar to the differences which today make Christians appear to be divided, it is also true that in primitive Christianity a confession of Christ included a fellowship with the brethren and the isolated confessor does not appear to have been a consideration. The idea of Christ as the head of the Church and the believer one of the many members of the body, excludes the possibility of any one being a part of Christ, and

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yet not a part of His body, the church. Therefore, first of all, it is to be maintained that those of us who are members of the Mennonite church are so because we believe ourselves to be members of the body of our Lord.

Environment is an influence which we, to be fair, must take into consideration when giving reasons for our connection with the type of Christianity of which we are a part. Environment accounts for most people's church connections. Unless their relations have been disturbed by some peculiar providences, people are most likely to identify themselves with the church of their parents, or, at least, with that church most closely connected with the religious influences brought to bear upon childhood. The hold that pedobaptist communions have upon those born of parents in their fellowship is secured because their system makes the child a part of the church almost as soon as it is born. Such a fellowship is accidental in so far as the subject is concerned, but it gives the church a hold upon that one, which, unless some peculiar influences enter to disturb, is likely to last. The Mennonite church is committed to the doctrine of believers' baptism. One enters its fellowship not because he is brought into it through a covenant in which he has only an unconscious part, but because by an act of his own volition he wants to enter it and assumes the responsibilities involved with a clear understanding of what they mean.

Denominationalism of every kind has to meet the charge that it is a species of cast. Only by a system that permits the subject to decide for himself whether he will or will not be identified with the church of his parents can we meet the objection that people are what they are, denominationally, because, like the colored man, they "were born that way." Ours, we believe to be a reasonable system. It, at least, waits until the one who becomes identified with it knows and has the opportunity to act according to his knowledge. That the caste idea has a strong influence with all classes of Christians, how-

ever, may be noticed by the disappointment, or even resentment, sometimes shown when changes of denominational affiliation occur. When the changes happen to be from Protestant to Catholic or Catholic to Protestant the friends and relatives of those who make the change, even though these friends show little or no interest in matters of religion, are sure to regard the change to be an act of peculiar family disloyalty.

Providence, when placing me in a Mennonite home, designed that I should meet the responsibilities and opportunities that the church of my parents brought before me. To have been born into a famiiy whose ancestry has always been prominent and influential in the councils of the Mennonite church, whether it was the meeting at Dortrecht that gave us a formal written confession, or the one in Germantown, that, protesting against slavery, committed us to the recognition of the sacred rights of manhood, or at the gathering which led to the separation of 1847, that spake for the rights of private judgment in matters of faith, means to me that I have inherited a part in the maintenance of principles that are worth all the sacrifices they cost. To bear the name of Mennonite means to be a representative in this generation of that church whose birth came by the fire of persecution and whose growth involved the dangers, privations and struggles of pilgrim bands in many lands. The many little meeting houses with the silent witnesses of the faith who lie under the green close by and about which cluster the sacred associations of our impressionable youth should mean to those who are called upon to struggle and sacrifice in keeping alive the truths to which these simple shrines are consecrated what the poet makes Horatius say, when called upon to guard the bridge against an enemy bent upon destroying his beloved Rome:

"How can a man die better than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers and the temples of his gods?"

I am a Mennonite because I believe in the doctrines of the Mennonite church. This belief, though a sacred heritage, is,

after all, a thing that was born in me of conviction that came by a thoughtful perusal of the Word of God. There are types of Christianity that ignore the educational process commonly known as catechetical instruction and depend upon, or at least emphasize, the inspirational or the emotional methods by which men are brought to reject the world, the flesh and the devil and accept Christ. Very often the difference between the inspirational and the emotional are not defined or even clearly understood. There are sometimes spiritual crisis in some men's lives that mark the spiritual birth of a new man with an undeniable distinctiveness. Such was the experience of Martin Luther when the sudden death of his companion by lightning led him to exclaim, "Henceforth I become a monk of the Order Augustine." Such was the experience of Menno when under the double sign of death he was to notice the martyrdom of Sicke Snyder and then to feel the pang of the sword in his own breast as his own brother was led to execution for a part in the fanatical Anabaptist disorders. In both instances the subject rightly turned to the Word of God, and by diligent search found truth, solace and inspiration. There are three things that must work a subject's conversion, the Spirit of God working in him, the subject's willingness to yield to the Spirit's leading, and the guidance of the Word. Emotionalism too often leads one to suppose a peculiar mental experience to be all that is required in the making of a Christian and a fit subject for church fellowship. Unless the Word has its deep lasting influence in the experience of the subject and a process of sane reasoning backs up the suggestions that the emotions present the Spirit has nothing to work upon and the conversion is apt to be only a fit of excitement. There is a subtle danger in emotionalism. People run after it persuading themselves that its frequent appearance in them is an evidence of spiritual fruitfulness. "The fruit of the Spirit," says Paul, "is love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance....If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit." Gal. 5:22-25. Again, "The fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth." Eph. 5:9.

I believe that the young Christian who has been carefully trained under the direction of his pastor in the doctrines of the Word of God as his church understands them and presents them in the catechism is better equipped to meet the problems he has to solve in his Christian experience and possesses a better spiritual balance than the one whose emotional nature was the only object of attack when conversion was sought. I know from experience as a pastor that simply getting additions to the church by letter or transfer is not building solidly. The youth who has been led to faithful and prayerful study of the doctrines for which our church stands may not only be led to true conversion, proved by the fruit of the Spirit in him, but will become a loyal and lasting member of the communion into which he is received.

We owe a debt to our history. History imposes upon us a responsibility to posterity. The only way a cause is kept alive is through its living witnesses. Because of the faithful witness of the people of our church and those who have agreed with them in their peculiarities we see today a growing sentiment toward universal peace. The last few years have marked the only serious attention the nations of the world have ever given to abolishing the hellish art of war. For centuries our people have been regarded as harmless idle dreamers. Their consistent maintenance of peace principles sometimes gained sympathy for them, but too often contempt was the only thing given them. Today it must be admitted that they were far in advance of other Christians in this particular.

Believers' baptism always existed in the church, but it was the unpopular dogma of the minority. Sometimes it came into disrepute because heretical bodies saw fit to adopt it as something different from the existing types of Christianity against which they protested. The name Anabaptist became a bad odor in Reformation times and rational Christians who could not deny the Scriptural doctrine of believe first and then be baptized had much to endure because of it. It is comfort-

ing for us to note now how that a sentiment in favor of believer's baptism is developing among individuals in communion with pedobaptist churches. Only Roman Catholics and extreme Anglicans today champion the doctrine of baptismal regeneration wthout modification. With most Protestant Christians, so far as I can discover from the opinions they express, the baptism of an infant hardly means more than its consecration to God by the parents who assume the responsibility of bringing it up in the fear and admonition of the Lord. In other words, infant baptism has become an ordinance in which the parent who vows is more the subject than the infant upon whose head the water is poured. The doctrine of baptism, as we are committed to it imposes a direct personal and voluntary responsibility upon the one who is baptized. It becomes the seal of the contract which that one knowingly and willingly makes before the world.

Sometimes people get around the duties imposed upon the confessor of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount by explaining its precepts as ideals rather than laws. To attempt a literal obedience to these commands with them is visionary. This is a type of unbelief that would say: "The law of Christ won't work out in practice."

To me the name of God is the most sacred syllable that my lips can utter. If I may honor Him in the use of His name it will only be as He directs. Now I am commanded not to take His name in vain. He forbids my taking an oath. All oaths, whether profane or judicial, are a plain violation of the words of Christ. "Swear not at all" means just what the words imply notwithstanding all the spohistry brought to bear upon the subject. That the early Christians understood the Master clearly on this point, we may discover when James, many years later, repeats the sacred command. The non-swearing of oaths which my church accepts as a law, dignifies the words of our Lord. It excludes the possibility of having His words mean the opposite of what plain language implies. When I read the con-

fessions of the several historic churches, which teach that the oath is an institution divinely sanctioned, I thank God that I am not a part of those bodies who prefer to honor the Lord by commanding disobedience to His Word.

Church polity was once a subject much made of and indeed it is today of vital importance to the existence of some Christian bodies, they going so far as to maintain that a true church, a legitimate ministry and a valid sacrament are only possible under their peculiar type of government. Space does not permit the discussion of the Episcopal, Presbyterian and Congregational types of church polity into which the various church governments are divided. A church government, while it must have Scriptural sanction should be flexible enough to rightly serve its purpose. The wise, saintly fathers of the church, call them bishops if you will, should have a governing influence. The councils of the elders, call them presbyteries if you care to, are often effective in their deliberations. The voice of the congregation, call it congregationalism if you want to, is the voice of the people of God whom the Spirit directs. In my church I see a happy blending of the three systems. Do we not provide orders in the ministry according to the example of the apostolic church? Are not our conferences the bodies which guide the destiny of the church? And, after all, is not the voice of the congregation supreme? Who is there, be it bishop or presbytery, that can overrule a single congregation? I believe our polity to be flexible enough to be satisfactory in its working, yet rigid enough to conform to the New Testament type of Christian organization.

One of the first things that distinguished our church from other churches was its absolute separation from the state. This separation of church and state was advanced by Menno as a unique idea. It made the state the enemy of all who accepted the idea. With us today this is no more a new principle. The glorious history of our country proves that the church without political affiliations may be purer and more effective in its activities than the church which is a state institution. This Mennonite principle of separation of church and state has not outlived the necessity of its being emphasized. We must ever keep in mind that an ecclesiastical power under the sway of the scepter of the "prisoner of the Vatican" assumes that it has a claim upon this government as well as upon all other governments. It is never modest in its claims and will, whenever it gets the opportunity, enforce every demand it makes. One

needs only study the methods of the clerical parties of Europe to discover what a menace the power of Rome may become to our free institutions. I am a Mennonite because I know that Mennonite Protestantism will not compromise with Rome in matters affecting the liberities and institutions of my fatherland.

We are sometimes sneeringly referred to as literalists. The ordinance of feet-washing, as practiced in some of our churches, the peace principles, the non swearing of oaths, the Lord's Supper as a memorial feast, the simplicity of our organization and the absence of a dogmatic literature among us may well warrant the bearing of the name literalist, but what of it? Are we not to take the Bible for what it expresses in plain language? Right here let me express the opinion that the Bible is safer in the hands of our people, in our pulpits and in our schools because our people accept inspiration to mean that the Bible is the Word of God and therefore cannot be a development from cleverly blended myths or hazy documents, whose existence in original form must be assumed. Because it is from Him, miracles are not figures of speech and our Christ is Divine. With a history such as ours and an independence of thought such as our people have always shown, I cannot imagine the possibility of our people ever surrendering the Bible to the tender mercies of destructive critics and one-sided philological experts.

The simplicity with which Mennoniteism has always been distinguished makes us feel that we have something in our faith that appeals to the plain man. There may be High-church Episcopalians or High-church Lutherans, but High-church Mennoniteism would be an absurdity. The tendency toward this sort of thing is decidedly marked in our day. Our mission is to preserve a faith such as the slaves and refugees in the sandits and quarries of Rome could practice in primitive times when velvet vestments, bejeweled crosses, gilded altars and shining candles were out of the question, and prayer, exhortation and singing of hymns were the order of service.

As a Mennonite I have a part, a responsibility, in ministering to the needs of the miserable, in testifying for Christ before the world and in carrying the gospel to the heathen. These duties I cannot shirk. I must undertake to engage in them in company with those with whom I can best work effectively—those whose ideas and ideals are nearest my own Therefore I am a Mennonite.